

RIMBAUD THE PRECURSOR

Visionary and Rebel

By Enid Starkie

A hundred years ago Arthur Rimbaud, one of the major French poets—and a world poet as well,—was born in the small provincial town of Charleville in Northern France. During the last quarter of a century there have been few poets in any country who have exercised more influence than he, or who have seemed more in harmony with contemporary conditions and preoccupations.

Yet this interest was not a sudden or rapid growth. His light—as Gide said in another connection—was like that of one of those distant stars which only reaches us a long time after the star itself is dead. The reason for the slow development of his popularity may be in part, though not wholly, that he himself published only three of his poems and his "Saison en Enfer." A further obstacle to appreciation was lack of a scholarly and reliable edition of his writings, the first such being the one edited by Bouillane de Lacoste which only began to appear in 1939.

There are further reasons which explain why, when his work first appeared, during the Symbolist movement, the men of letters of the day did not take him to their hearts as they did Baudelaire and Wagner. The Symbolist movement was a period of extreme sophistication and refinement in sensation; when the parlour of Des Esseintes, with its magnolias, its lilies, and its incense, had become the ivory tower of literature; when the aesthetic ideal of life, the gesture of living and its trappings, was more important than life itself. Then Villiers De L'Isle Adam had cried in "Axel": "Live! Our servants will do that for us!" For the poets of that time Rimbaud's uncompromising directness, his harsh realism, and even his austere visionary experience held little charm.

Nihilism

But with the ending of the First World War everything changed. In the disillusionment with the resulting peace and with the tinsel gaiety of the twenties, when the ideals with which the war ended had vanished, when the great slump came and fascism was widespread, then the young men of letters recoiled violently against those in authority, and there ensued a period of iconoclasm when no poet seemed more in harmony with the general disgust and revolt than Rimbaud. He too, in his own day, had been bitterly wounded by existing conditions, and it was the "blessure et révolte" in him which the new poets first appreciated—his nihilism and refusal of life as he found it. To the disgusted and disillusioned generation of the thirties this seemed the sublimest form of pride.

Rimbaud's negation and total rejection are found in the post-war literary schools in all countries, and the writers, in their opposition to all laws—both moral and artistic,—found in his writings justification for their indignations.

Rimbaud, in his reaction against the positivist and materialistic ideals of his own age, had aimed at undermining the authority of reason by indulging in intoxicants—drugs and drink—and claimed that by "le dérèglement de tous les sens" it was possible to attain certainty and truth. This led eventually to the substitution of the subconscious for reason. The Surrealists, inspired by the discoveries of psycho-analysis, realised the vast sources of artistic treasure buried in the subconscious, and they went still farther than Rimbaud in their contempt for reason, as they resorted to automatic writing even as an instrument to release this energy.

Then, as soon as the ideas of Freud had had time to percolate down to the general public, Rimbaud became one of the favourite subjects for the analyst, and this was of absorbing

interest to a generation avid for sensation.

As well as drawing on the subconscious—he would have called it the superconscious—for artistic material, Rimbaud saw also the significance of the unconscious memories of childhood. He believed that the child, far more than the rational adult, possesses senses accurately tuned to register, without conscious control, the most vivid sensations, and he imagined that there must be some hidden significance in such unalloyed emotional experience which it would be valuable to recapture and make permanent in poetic form. Much modern literature is precisely this recapturing of lost intuitive sensations and memories, and there can rarely have been so many works inspired by childhood as have been produced since the First World War.

The Power of Vision

Furthermore the child has an unconscious visionary gift which the materialism of life too often destroys, but the poet, reliving deliberately his early experience, Rimbaud thought, should do all in his power to retain this divine faculty. For him poetry was akin to mysticism and prophetic vision, and the poet was no longer he who makes—as the Latin meaning of the word implies—but he who sees, has the power of vision. There can be no doubt that, at the time of his fullest belief in himself as a poet and a seer, he was granted the final vision and reached the Inner Castle of which Saint Teresa of Avila wrote, where he enjoyed supernatural and perfect bliss. Many are the modern poets—such as Henri Pichette in France and David Gascoyne and Dylan Thomas in England—who follow Rimbaud in his visionary adventure.

This new conception of poetry entailed new modes and a new language. Rimbaud tried to convey his rare sensations in a new vocabulary and in new forms. He hoped, in doing this, to escape from conventional poetic language, conventional poetic beauty, and to change the hierarchy of values. Similar trends are found in the modern poets of the Auden school, who, in their desire to escape from the traditional well-made line and literary images, made the trivial and commonplace poetic.

All the new rhythms and forms of modern poetry are to be found in Rimbaud's writings, and—in France at least—the art has as yet progressed no farther than the point where he abandoned it. As Edith Sitwell says, it cannot be doubted that he is the originator of modern verse and prose rhythms, and that he was to modern English prose and verse poems what Poe was to Baudelaire and Mallarmé.

His accomplishment in the prose poem is particularly significant for poets to-day. Stephen Spender says that, living as we do in an age of prose, the medium most suited, even to poetic imagination, when it deals with the complexity and abstraction of modern life, is prose. This is shown in the popularity enjoyed to-day among writers by the prose poem, for it readily adapts itself to unconscious and visionary composition.

With Rimbaud poetry was not content with being merely poetry but aimed at becoming more than itself. Perhaps that is the reason why he abandoned it at the end, when he discovered that it could not be more than literature, and he scorned it at that price.

Perhaps this inability of poetry to become more than itself explains why—in France at all events—it is turning away from the esoteric and the visionary towards the traditional conception of literature, is seeking specialised perfection of form and specialised poetic language, as the younger poets apparently favour the well-constructed line and the "beauteous" imagery of a former

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